

The influence of relationship history and multi-partner fertility on later-life contact with adult children

The parent-child relationship is one of the most important social bonds in human lives. While the importance of the parent-child relationship is obvious when children are young, most of the relationship is lived out during children's adulthood (Fingerman et al., 2023). During this time, adult children and older parents are an important source of social and practical support for one another (Kalmjin, 2015). Parent-child solidarity is shaped by macro and micro-level factors and is influenced by past and current life circumstances and events of both the child and the parent. One such important life event is parental separation. The dissolution of parents' relationships is an increasingly common experience for many children, whether during childhood, young adulthood, or later in life. Separations may also be followed by one or both parents repartnering and having additional children. Concern has been raised about the impact this increased family complexity has, which has coincided with population ageing in many high-income countries, on the relationship between parents and their adult children.

Few studies that have looked in detail at the additional impact of post-separation behaviours including repartnering and additional children. This paper aims to understand how a child's place in the parents' overall relationship history affects parent-child contact. Using survey data from Australia, we use several measures to capture the relationship biography of the parent and the place of each of their children in this biography.

Data

The data come from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. HILDA is an annual longitudinal household panel survey, commencing in 2001. It collects information about the household, and individual interviews are conducted with all willing household members aged 15 and over. The individual interviews cover a wide range of topics, including: education; family formation; health and caring responsibilities (Wooden et al. 2024). A set of core questions are included annually, while others are included on a rotating basis. In 2008, 2015 and 2019 questions were included on the frequency of contact with any non-resident adult children. This study uses the 2019 data.

The initial sample size was 17,462 respondents aged 15 and over. We excluded respondents who did not have a biological adult child aged 18 or over ($N=10,499$). This reduced the effective sample size to 6,963. We further excluded 531 respondents with missing information on dates of relationships; 33 with missing data on the age of a child, and 17 who were living with their ex-partner. The final analytical sample is 6,382 parents (2,778 fathers and 3,604 mothers) who reported on contact frequency with a total of 15,698 children aged 18 and over.

While all the data is based on the parent's relationship history variables, we structured the relationship history variables from the child's point of view. Each child of a parent can have a very different experience of their parent's relationship history depending on when they were born.

Dependent variable

The outcome of interest is the level of contact between parents and adult children. While contact is a form of support itself, it is also necessary for the exchange of other types of support including practical and financial support. As Fokkema et al., (2008: p.19) note 'the more contact there is, the easier it is to give and receive support and to identify whether support is needed'. Contact was measured using two questions which asked parents, for each

non-coresident child aged 18 and over, how often they: a) spoke in person, and b) had contact by telephone, email, or letter. In both cases there were eight answer categories: 1) Daily, 2) Not daily but more than once per week, 3) Once a week, 4) Less often than once a week but at least once a month, 5) Less than monthly but at least once every 3 months, 6) 1 to 3 times a year, 7) Less than once a year, 8) Never. The two variables were combined into a single variable which captured the most frequent level of contact.

We also include co-residence between parent and child as a separate, but related, contact measure. Frequency of contact is only measured for non-coresident children, but a considerable proportion of the adult children still live at home and excluding that information would lead to selective results .

Independent variables

For the predictors the primary focus is to understand the role of the parent's relationship and childbearing history. However, it is not possible to capture all the possible detail of the parent's current and past relationships, and multi-partner fertility in one measure. Instead, different aspects of the child's place in the parent's relationship and childbearing career are captured in several different measures defined from the perspective of the child. These variables are outlined in Table 1. Several of the variables are defined for all parents whereas others are defined for subsamples of children who have experienced parental separation.

We also control for other factors which have been identified in previous research as being associated with frequency of contact (Fokkema et al., 2008). Some of these factors vary at the child level, whereas others are identified at the parent level. For all children we control for their age and sex. For non-resident children we also include if they are married, if they have children, and geographic distance. For parents we include country of birth, age, total number of children, whether they had a long-term health condition, and education level.

The average age of the adult children is 37-39 years old, while average age for parents is 64 years. Most parents reported relatively high frequency with 63% of non-resident children having contact with their fathers at least once a week, and 78% for mothers.

Method

The first stage of the analysis is descriptive and provides a general overview of the relationship history and childbearing history of the respondents. We then conduct multivariate analysis to examine the association between the parent's relationship history and contact with their adult children. We use multilevel regression techniques, as our data has multiple levels with children 'nested' within each parent. Analysis was primarily conducted using the Generalized Structural Equation modelling (gsem) framework in Stata 18, to include both coresidence and contact frequency. The results presented are primarily from random effects models, however a number of fixed-effects models were also used to determine whether contact frequency for different children born to the same parent varied according to the child's experience of parental separation. For some children we may have reports from both parents, most commonly if the parents are still together and both interviewed in the survey. To avoid double counting, and to investigate the interaction between gender and the relationship between the variables, all analysis is conducted separately for mothers and fathers.

Table 1 Relationship history variables

	Variable	Focus	Relevant sample
1	Current relationship status 1) Parents are together 2) Parent is widowed from child's other parent (no further relationships) 3) Parent is single 4) Parent is in a repartnered relationship	Broad relationship history	All parents
2	Age at separation 1) Separation at 0-4 years of age 2) Separation at 5-9 years of age 3) Separation at 10-17 years of age 4) Separation at 18+ Also modelled as continuous variable.	Timing of separation	Separated parents ^a
3	Repartnering and half-siblings 1) None repartnering or half-siblings 2) Repartnering only 3) Repartnering and half-siblings	Repartnering experience and multi-partner fertility	Separated parents ^a
4	Repartnering after separation 1) No 2) Yes – 1 relationship 3) Yes – 2 relationships 4) Yes- 3+ relationships	Repartnering experience	Separated & widowed parents
5	Time since last transition (years) Type of last transition 1) Separated (from child's other parent) 2) Separated (from a repartnered relationship) 3) Widowed Repartnered	Timing and duration of repartnering and other relationship transitions	Separated & widowed parents
6	Older half-sibling 1) Yes 2) No	Multi-partner fertility, order of child in parent's childbearing history.	All parents
7	Half-siblings 1) None 2) Has older-half sibling 3) Has younger-half sibling	Multi-partner fertility, order of child in parent's childbearing history.	Separated & widowed parents
8	Step and half-siblings in current partnership 1) With partner- no half or step-siblings 2) With partner- step sibling 3) With partner- half sibling With partner- stepchild info missing	Multi-partner fertility & step-children	Separated but repartnered parents

Notes: ^a Includes those children born outside of any relationship (N=259). They are coded as having an age of separation of zero.

Discussion

A high proportion of the older parents in our sample had experienced separation and repartnering, particularly when their children were young but also later in life. As highlighted by the linked lives principle of life course theory, their children also lived through these experiences as they saw their original family configuration split and each parent go on to have their own trajectories. However, the impact of separation varied substantially both between parents as well as across children with the same parent. Mothers maintaining consistent and frequent contact with their children after separation, regardless of their subsequent relationship history. For fathers, their post-separation trajectories as well as the age of the child at parental separation played a large role in their contact with children in later life.

Using the life course framework we used different indicators to capture the experience of parent-child dyads, as they lived through parental separation and navigated different post-transition experiences. Overall, the highest frequency of contact between children and their parents occurred when the parents were still together, or when one parent was widowed. In the latter case there was also a high degree of coresidence with children. In contrast, for fathers, the two groups that had experienced parental separation from the child's mother: those currently single or currently repartnered had markedly lower levels of contact. For mothers, coresidence in particular was lower for currently repartnered mothers, but overall mothers maintained frequent and regular contact with children regardless of their relationship history. In our sample most separations had occurred a long time ago, particularly when the (now) adult children were young children.

As found when looking at age at separation, the younger the age at separation the more vulnerable the father-child dyad was to have low levels of contact when the child is an adult. The effect of age at separation was however strongly linked to two important post-separation behaviours: repartnering and additional children. The younger the age at separation, the more likely it was that mothers and fathers repartnered or had additional children in new relationships.

Repartnering in itself was associated with lower levels of contact, but it was new children that had the most negative impact on father's level of contact with children from a previous relationship. Conversely, at least between fathers, older half-siblings do not have a large impact. This points to evidence of 'family swapping', with fathers investing in new family units at the expense of older children; however in our study the effect seems to be limited primarily to biological children and not as much to step-children, in contrast to other studies (Noël-Miller 2013).

The overall contact pattern for fathers shows a skew towards lower frequencies, especially when repartnering and younger child age at separation are factors. The distribution of contact frequencies suggests that fathers are more likely to lose contact over time, particularly if their personal circumstances change significantly post-separation. Time and duration in family transitions also emerged as important components. The effects of events like separation or repartnering varied significantly depending on how recent these transitions were. As time passes relationships can strengthen or continue to weaken. The study also highlights the importance of co-residence in understanding parent-child contact, especially as in many high-income countries, including Australia, an increasing number of adult children live for longer in a parent's home (Budinski, et al 2023).

References

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